

BOOSTING INNOVATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS AT TELECOM ITALIA

For more than a decade, the Industrial Liaison Program has helped Telecom Italia, Italy's leading telecommunications provider, track potentially critical technological innovations. Throughout this period, ILP staff has facilitated ongoing and ad hoc meetings between the company's research and development arm CSELT and MIT researchers. "Telecom Italia has always paid particular attention to universities and innovation centers," says Roberto Saracco, who directs CSELT's Communications Area. "But today MIT is the main international one we're still connected with. They conduct a broad set of research and business-oriented activities relevant to our needs."

Saracco notes that over the years, ILP initiated contacts with MIT faculty, staff, and students have broadened his staff's perspective of the telecommunications marketplace and exposed them to many important innovations.

Sometimes these contacts have led directly to new research thrusts. For example, in the midst of periodic ILP-initiated meetings in 1998, CSELT staff explored projects undertaken by the Media Lab's Things That Think Consortium. Intrigued by one project featuring a dedicated control unit that runs lights, stereo systems, and other electronic devices in a living room, CSELT soon launched a research effort to empower a mobile phone to perform this function. Telecom Italia Mobile demonstrated the service by October, 1999, and plans to begin offering it to customers in the near future. Saracco expects demand to grow as other companies working with the Media Lab develop interfaces linking home electronic products to the Internet.

Other ILP-based contacts have not only stimulated new research directions at Telecom Italia, but also helped publicize the company's products and services. One month before setting up its booth at Telecom '99, the world's largest telecommunications fair, CSELT aimed to demonstrate how recent innovations were generating new ways of conducting electronic commerce. Did MIT have something they could use for such a demo? A single telephone call to the ILP sparked a meeting with Nicholas Negroponte

and other Media Lab researchers. "The ILP was very flexible," Saracco recalls. "On very short notice they connected us to the right people."

On the fair's opening day in Geneva, CSELT demonstrated a version of a Media Lab-designed interactive multimedia interface – a point-and-click display that can empower people to obtain actionable information about consumer products featured on the screen during television programs. The students at the Media Lab who developed the interface customized and deployed it for the demo at Telecom '99, where it simultaneously influenced future research at CSELT and attracted visitors to the Telecom Italia booth.

"Participating in the ILP program has provided us with a firmer foundation for our business-focused research, and a better way to serve our clients," says Saracco. In his view, the organization serves as a guide to a vast array of MIT resources – one that hones in on and secures access to individuals and technologies useful to his group's research objectives. "It's exciting for us because there's some place we can rely on," says Saracco. "Whenever I need something I can just call or email, and then get a response within hours."

For more information about how we can put the resources of MIT to work for you, call the Industrial Liaison Program at 1-617-253-2691, e-mail us at liaison@ilp.mit.edu, or visit <http://ilp-www.mit.edu/>